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ABSTRACT

Urban school superintendents from Pennsylvania and New Jersey met to consider issues related to the improvement of urban secondary schools. Although the public is pessimistic about all urban public schools, it regards secondary schools with particular pessimism. There are 70 urban high schools in New Jersey and 81 in Pennsylvania. Superintendents grouped their problems into the three areas--expectations, resources, and education. Expectations concern not only the expectations teachers have for their students, which are often entirely too low, but also the expectations the public has of its school systems. Discussants unanimously agreed that resources for quality education in inner-city high schools are insufficient, but their definition of resources was broader than mere budgetary considerations. Because they did not imagine that either expectations or resources would improve greatly, superintendents acknowledged that they need to work with what they have and focus on education through professional development and improving the public's understanding of urban realities. Recommendations for helping urban secondary schools centered around these areas. (Contains 24 references.) (SLD)

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THE URBAN SCHOOLS SUPERINTENDENTS
OF
NEW JERSEY

POSITION PAPER #5

REASSESSING URBAN SECONDARY EDUCATION
HOW CAN WE RENEW OUR HIGH SCHOOLS?

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REASSESSING URBAN SECONDARY EDUCATION: HOW CAN WE RENEW OUR HIGH SCHOOLS?

Introduction

Nearly three quarters of the people living in central cities give their schools a grade of "C" or lower. One in ten believes that central city public schools fail completely, while only one in twenty gives them an "A". Deserved or not, poll after poll shows that public schools in central cities are held in poor esteem. For schools, the consequences of these attitudes have been severe. Recent Gallup polls have shown that:

- 48% of central city residents oppose tax increases for improving schools.
- 50% of central city residents believe the school year should be lengthened and 48% favor lengthening the school day.
- Non-public schools have experienced a 23% increase in enrollment since 1972 and they now enroll 10% of America's students; a large number of these are city students whose parents think public schools are inferior.

To reverse this poor public image, urban educators are looking at their schools critically and trying to create more effective and productive learning environments. Some have met with success. On the whole, though, these successes have been too few to change how city dwellers' view their public schools. Moreover, although the public is generally negative about all urban public schools, it regards urban secondary schools with particular pessimism.

Urban Secondary Schools

Urban secondary schools have been targets for reformers and critics for decades. They have been faulted for poor learning climates, poor instructional programs, poor teaching staffs, and poor achievement. Some

critics have gone so far as to blame them for the poor economic and social conditions of cities, even though, more accurately, they are the victims. Successful efforts to improve effectiveness and long traditions of high quality in some schools have generally been over looked in the rush to label urban high schools our national disgrace.

Inner city high schools often are described as microcosms of the inner city. They reflect the inner city's unique and often harsh social, cultural, and economic milieu. Whether this is true or not, in the most extreme cases inner city schools are very unlike their suburban counterparts.

- Their student population is largely economically disadvantaged and minority. A great many inner city high school students are from single parent or no parent households. They are extremely mobile, moving around the city as employment and housing opportunities shift. Many feel alienated and either drop out of school or are chronically absent. Some are impulsive, aggressively negative about authority, and ambivalent about their future. A few commit a large number of acts of violence on each other and their teachers. Twenty percent will graduate with deficiencies in basic skills; thirty to fifty percent will not graduate at all.

- Many of the schools themselves are dilapidated with little hope of being repaired as negative public attitudes, declining enrollments, and financial cutbacks combine with inflation to lower their budgets. Nationally, they suffer between $200 and $600 million of damage a year due to vandalism. These schools also need resouces to meet state and federal mandates such as desegregation, affirmative action, and least restrictive environment. They typically are monitored very closely for compliance and penalized more often for non-compliance than suburban schools.

- Programs at inner city high schools tend to be barebones ones that frequently do little to meet student needs. There are more "special" and remedial classes in these schools, but class size is still very high and teachers carry a heavier load than their suburban colleagues. Vocational programs often are inadequate and out of touch with the needs of employers. Due in large part to state curriculum requirements, most students are enrolled in "general education" programs that offer inadequate preparation for adulthood.

- The staff of inner city schools are typically more white than black and predominantly middle class. Most don't live in the neighborhood; some don't live in the city. They are, in many cases, poorly prepared to cope with the students and educational problems they face every day. They exhibit symptoms of high stress bordering on battle fatigue. Turnover of teaching staff is relatively low, but there is a high rate of principal turnover. Larger numbers of teachers are absent or late each day in inner city schools than in suburban schools. There are those whose expectations of their students are low. This group typically makes few demands and usually settles for less. There are serious value conflicts in most city high schools, not only between staff and students, but also among staff. Intra staff value conflict manifests itself in many inner city high schools as a lack of goal consensus and educational focus, and a staff suspicious of and in competition with each other.

Yet the number of successful urban high schools is growing as the problems and needs of urban educators are met head on by educational researchers and practioners. Some urban schools have restored order and renewed a commitment to excellence. Their students have begun to approach the achievement levels of their suburban peers. These results, although encouraging, are still an exception, but their existence proves that the challenge of creating effective urban secondary schools is not insurmountable.

Discussion: Urban Secondary Schools in New Jersey and Pennsylvania

There are 70 urban high schools in New Jersey and 81 in Pennsylvania. They range in enrollment from fewer than 200 to over 4,000 students. Most of these schools are typical urban secondary schools with most--if not all--of the typical urban secondary school problems. Among urban superintendents in the two discussion groups dealing with this topic, however, problems in urban high schools boiled down to three themes: expectations, resources, and education.

Expectations

"Expectations" not only refers to the expectations teachers have of students and students have of teachers, but also to the expectations that the public and the state departments of education have for secondary schools.

According to these superintendents, many high school teachers expect too little from their students. They set their quality standards too low and require students to do too little work. In fact, discussants saw a definite difference in teacher attitudes toward students in elementary school and students in secondary school, with high school teachers being more negative about their students' abilities and potential for achievement. Students and parents often share these same negative expectations. Perennially poor performance by city students on state-wide tests for promotion and graduation reinforces these low expectations for student success.

Discussants also saw monitoring processes in both states as contributing to negative expectations because, as conducted, the processes tend to label urban high schools and their students "unsuccessful." Students, teachers, and the public soon pick up the cue. It is true that since the introduction of monitoring, urban students' academics performance has risen in both Pennsylvania and New Jersey. Neverthless, discussants remained discontented over state policy makers' reluctance to adjust the monitoring process so that it focuses on evidence of improvement rather than on meeting state determined absolute standards.

Negative expectations present one kind of problem. Unrealistic expectations present another. It is not uncommon for the public, the media, and

even staff in state education departments to hold unrealistic expectations for urban high schools. For example, the public often looks to the public high school to ameliorate social ills as well as to help youngsters learn. Integrating the races, reducing drug and alcohol use, mainstreaming disabled, assimilating bilingual populations, achieving equity for female students, and increasing youth employment all illustrate of social objectives that the public expects urban high schools to achieve. High schools forced to accept these additional social functions carry such a large burden that they do an inadequate job at both curing social ills and assisting learning.

Just as unrealistically, the public also expects urban high schools to do a suburban middle class job with students who are neither suburban nor middle class. The assumption is that families of urban high school students can provide the same level of educational support and resources that suburban ones can. This often leads critics to ignore harsh realities of urban schools -- low attendance rates, the high numbers of students with special needs, the many transient students and families, the snatching of students by private, vocational, and magnet schools, and the inequities of school finance systems.

Staff of state education departments also sometimes express unrealistic expectations about urban high schools. For example, they expect urban students to meet the same standards at the same pace as their suburban and rural counterparts when in fact, most urban students have unique educational needs. Moreover, staff at state education departments seem to expect urban students to keep pace without the same level of program and resource support that their suburban and rural counterparts

enjoy. Taken together, these expectations tend toward monolithic approaches to testing and promotion and unrealistic fiscal policies.

State education department personnel also expect teachers in all high schools to be cooperative and go the extra mile for their students. This is not always the case. Discussants perceived that many teachers feel as if they were under siege. Continuous criticism and pressure combined with the stress of their work have weakened teachers' morale and commitment to the job. Motivation is lacking. Cooperation frequently goes only as far as the particulars of teachers' contracts. As a result, many curtail their involvement in after school or co-curricular activities. This lack of cooperation even extends to peers; that is, teachers rarely cooperate with each other beyond the terms of their contract. In fairness, however, it might be noted that most inner city teachers do not have the time and opportunity to do so.

College administrators and employers, too, often have unrealistic expectations for inner city high schools. Both assume that schools can respond to shifting job qualifications and entrance requirements more rapidly than is the case. When standards for college admission or employment shift, high schools are expected to graduate students who meet the new criteria and are criticized when this doesn't happen. Few stop to consider that high schools make up only the last three or four steps of an elaborate, slowly-changing educational system. To compound this situation, neither employers nor colleges take an active role in helping high schools make improvements.

Finally, discussants faulted the media for reinforcing the public's unrealistic expectations by showing only negative aspects of high schools.

The consensus was that the media know how hostile and difficult the urban environment is, how it influences schools and students, and the special problems and needs of urban high schools. Yet they continue to compare urban with suburban schools to the detriment of the former. These unfair comparisons reinforce negative public opinion and penalize urban high schools even more by promoting a cycle of low public confidence, declining public support, inadequate public resources, and overburdened public schools.

Resources

Discussants unanimously agreed that resources for doing a quality job in inner city high schools are insufficient. Their definition of "resources," however, was broader than mere budgetary considerations. For instance, these superintendents felt hamstrung by the poor condition of their high school facilities. Many thought their high schools are simply too big, and argued that buildings attempting to serve several thousand students--often in as many as three shifts--impede the educational process. They noted further that the majority of high schools were built before World War II and most are in bad need of repair -- if not beyond repair. These superintendents ranked new buildings among essential prerequisites to educational success. Whatever the conditions of their buildings, though, it was generally agreed that high school facilities are not being used as efficiently as they could be if they were redesigned with current student, teacher, and program needs in mind.

Financial resources were also discussed, with emphasis on how money is used rather than how much is available. Discussants expressed frustration that many state and federal funds are targeted to catagorical programs, a

practice that seems to have limited pay-off and gives local districts too little flexibility. One discussant mentioned as a not-too-uncommon example prohibitions against using computers purchased with bilingual education funds for English-speaking students. With greater financial flexibility, superintendents believed they could use limited resources more efficiently and for greater impact.

Lack of fiscal flexibility is a problem for building principals, as well, with the same kind of negative effect at the building level. Superintendents saw high school principals as key actors in school renewal and effectiveness. Yet, again, because government regulations or central office policies and procedures permit little or no flexibility in the allocation of resources, principals often are unable to make needed changes in their schools. Likewise, resource scarcity prevents principals from recruiting top-notch staff. To make matters worse, inner city principals often have to spend inordinate amounts of money on budget items that are inconsequential in suburban settings: security personnel, security equipment, and graffitti removal, for example.

The result is that education for the average or slightly above average inner city student is often shortchanged. Students are siphoned off to vocational, non-public, suburban, or magnet schools. Their parents become non-supporters who focus their interest, efforts, and money elsewhere. Public high schools then become even more resource poor while at the same time becoming more resource needy.

Education

The discussants did not see their resource or expectations situation improving, either by itself or through outside intervention. The most

common sentiment was "we have to work with what we have." Within this challenge, the superintendents looked upon education--in the form of professional development for their staff and increased understanding of urban school realities by the public--their most promising avenue for improvement.

Professional development at all levels is a great hope; it is also a great deficiency in most urban schools. Teachers need training in how to teach inner city students more effectively. Professional development aimed at helping them adjust their attitudes toward their students is equally important. And, they need professional development to help them gain the skills and attitudes that lead to cooperative planning and shared decision-making.

High school principals need to learn cooperative planning and decision-making skills as well, and to use these skills more frequently. According to the superintendents they also need to learn how to manage decline better. Too many fiscal and organizational decisions, said the superintendents, were being made by principals without considering the realities of student enrollment, turnover, and mobility. In addition, discussants saw a need for leadership or management training for building administrators. Ideally, this training would be similar to that provided to private sector managers in areas such as:

- o cooperative planning,
- o data analysis,
- o motivation of staff,
- o long-range planning,
- o conflict management,

- o supervision, and
- o computer applications.

Nor did the superintendents spare themselves. Many said they could use this kind of professional development too. Yet, most agreed that neither inservice nor preservice training programs--as presently designed and delivered--are adequate to meet these needs.

Another topic in the superintendents' discussions was education to increase understanding of the problems and difficulties facing urban educators by the public, the media, and the policy-makers. Superintendents saw public ignorance of the realities of urban education contributing to their lack of resources and the tight regulations/monitoring imposed on them. They believed, however, that public ignorance is correctable provided they--the superintendents--commit themselves to informing and educating the public and seek the cooperation of the media and state departments of education in this effort. To paraphrase one discussant, urban superinten- dents could solve a lot of their problems if they improved the level and quality of information going to the community and enlisted the community as an advocate rather than as adversary.

Recommendations

Superintendents' recommendations for renewing urban high schools focused on three areas.

- o Encourage realistic, yet positive, expectations about urban high schools and their students among community members, business leaders, and state policy-makers.

Beginning with a public information campaign to increase public commitment and support, superintendents must paint an accurate picture of the urban

school scene. They should continue to emphasize success stories but at the same time, make the public more aware of their problems. They also should involve the entire in-school and out-of-school community in decisions about improvement. One way to do this is to enlist the aid, lobbying power, and expertise of the business and sports communities to improve programs, provide incentives, and motivate staff and students. Guarantees can be built into this involvement if necessary. Work with the media should focus on promoting and publicizing the need for educational excellence and showing that such excellence is linked to continuing support. Superintendents should seek to reestablish academics as a top high school and community priority, reassessing the high school's organization, its program offerings, and its educational delivery system in light of the impact each has on academic achievement. Changes may be necessary to support academic achievement.

- o Establish training programs geared specifically toward urban secondary educators, ones that provide training relevant to the urban high school experience.

Current inservice and preservice training should be reviewed in light of their appropriateness for urban educators' needs. Those who deliver inservice or preservice programs should be encouraged to target them for school specific interests whenever possible. Training should be district-wide and on-going. It should promote not only increased instructional skills but also enhanced managerial and urban school survival expertise. The private sector should be asked to help design, develop, and support some training programs. State education departments also should design, develop, and support training programs, perhaps on the order of New Jersey's and Pennsylvania's academies, which are specifically aimed at

helping staff boost student achievement in areas linked to state requirements and tests. Providing staff development opportunities--and subsidies--is one way to let staff know they count and to encourage staff to "go beyond the contract" to make education effective for high school students.

- o Develop a plan for creating a climate of advocacy for urban secondary schools among all those who influence educational resource allocations.

Beginning with urban superintendents in each state, and with both states working together, an effective coalition can be established for improved urban education. This coalition should:

- o accurately identify and publicize the realities of urban secondary schools;
- o create an alternative agenda to that proposed by the state department of education to meet the needs of their schools;
- o actively and aggressively promote the interests of city high schools and students in the press, community, and legislature;
- o lobby for equitable, adequate funding for urban high school improvements;
- o work to insure dynamic, active representation of urban secondary school concerns and priorities to state boards of education; and
- o help urban secondary school educators focus on educational issues and challenges rather than on those better addressed by social welfare or juvenile justice agencies.

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